

Avoiding Bias: Using Sensitive Language and Avoiding Bias in Scholarly Writing

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Writers should write objectively and inclusively to receive respect and trust from readers, as well as to avoid alienating readers. To be objective means to write with curiosity, rather than having a preset opinion, and to engage with research, rather than presenting a personal preference.

Being objective in your writing is a skill that you will develop, just like your academic voice. Though having a passion for your topic makes the writing process easier, it is important not to let it take over your draft. Here are some tips for keeping objectivity and eliminating bias.

1. Stay away from generalization by avoiding stated or implied “all” or “never” assertions.

Biased: Educators do not consider each child’s particular learning style when developing lessons.

This sentence does not acknowledge the variation within the population of educators, implying that all educators are like this.

Better: Some educators do not consider each child’s particular learning style when developing lessons.

This sentence acknowledges that there are some educators who do not fall into this category, that all educators are not the same.

2. Support statements with research or answer the question “Says who?”

Biased: Third-grade boys are chronically disruptive, while the girls are always eager to please.

Here, all boys are generalized as having the same disruptive behavior, while the writer is also assuming all girls are better behaved, showing a bias toward girls.

Better: In Clooney’s (2008) study of Kansas City third graders, 35% of the boys and 68% of the girls were able to complete instructions for a tedious assignment without showing signs of agitation.

This sentence is more specific, telling the reader the exact percentage of girls and boys that exhibited the behavior, avoiding the assumptions implied by the previous vague phrasing.

3. Be aware of your own biases and how these may be expressed in writing. This includes:

- Assumptions about professions.

Biased: The teacher should use technology when she is teaching her class.

This sentence assumes that teachers are female, making assumptions about the gender of this profession and creating gender bias.

Better: Teachers should use technology when they are teaching their classes.

This statement does not use gender-specific pronouns, but acknowledges a teacher can be male or female. Note that this sentence avoids bias by changing the singular “teacher” to be plural and uses plural pronouns; however, you could also include the singular “he or she” to avoid bias.

- Beliefs about specific populations.

Biased: Family is very important to the Hispanic population in my town.

This sentence assumes that all people of Hispanic heritage consider family to be important, especially those in the author’s town. There is not any room given for difference between these families or recognizing that some people of Hispanic heritage may not consider family to be important.

Better: According to Watson (2011), family is important to 47% of the Hispanic families in Auburn, Indiana.

This revision is more specific and considers the individual differences between Hispanic families by reporting the specific percentage of those who consider family to be important. It also gives specific information about who conducted the study and where, giving credibility to the writer.

- Statements based solely on personal experience.

Biased: My daughter texts constantly, which shows that teenagers use cell phones more than they did in the past.

This statement makes an assumption about all teenagers without basing it on research, but on the author’s own personal experience. While personal experiences are sometimes helpful, use them as supporting examples, rather than the sole basis for assertions.

Better: Teenager’s use of cell phones, specifically for texting, has increased 33% in the last 2 years (McDonald, 2011).

This sentence presents the same assertion, but uses specific statistical data to support the idea. Rather than basing this statement on one teenager’s behavior, it uses a study that surveyed a larger sample of teenagers.

4. Bias does not just have negative implications; writers who are too sympathetic are also displaying bias. Giving an overly favorable opinion of someone can eliminate objectivity.

Biased: While all teachers are very good at helping students learn, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) hinders teachers, not allowing them to serve students well. Without NCLB, teachers would be able to perform their jobs perfectly.

This statement is sympathetic towards teachers, stating that all teachers could help students if only the government had not passed NCLB. It assumes all teachers excel at helping students, not allowing for the possibility that some teachers are not very good at their jobs.

Better: While most teachers are able to help students learn, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) hinders teachers, making it more difficult to serve students well. Although there are other issues that affect teachers' ability to perform their jobs well, without NCLB more teachers would serve their students better.

This revision takes into account that there are other issues affecting teachers' performance besides No Child Left Behind and provides a more balanced view of teachers' abilities to help students.

5. Sensitive language helps you avoid bias (as discussed on pp. 71-76 in the APA manual).

- Be specific rather than descriptive.

Biased: I surveyed the elderly participants while collecting data.

This statement does not give specific information about the age of the participants, allowing the reader to make assumptions. Without specific information, "elderly" could refer to someone who is 50 years old.

Better: I surveyed the participants between ages 70 and 84 while collecting data.

This statement specifically tells the reader what the age range was for the participants in this survey, ensuring that the reader does not make assumptions about the ages of the participants.

- Keep wording parallel

Biased: The man and female turned out to be the directors of the Red Cross.

While "man" is fine on its own, paired with "female," it is not parallel. Additionally, "female" should only be used as an adjective (like "the female participant"), not as a noun (like in this sentence). Instead, always use "man" with "woman" and "male" with "female" and only use "male" and "female" as adjectives and "man" and "woman" as nouns.

Better: The man and woman turned out to be the directors of the Red Cross

In this sentence, the parallel terms "man" and "woman" are used. Also, "female" and "male" are not used as nouns at all.

- Be aware of sexual identity terms. These often change, so consult www.apastyle.org for the most up-to-date terminology.

Biased: The population who were homosexual in the survey responded “No” 75% of the time (Martin, 2010).

In this sentence, the entire population is considered to be “homosexual,” which is not very descriptive. Per APA (p. 74), “homosexual” is not a specific enough term.

Better: The population who were lesbian responded “No” 75% of the time (Martin, 2010).

Instead, in this sentence, the term “lesbian” is used to be more specific about the sexual orientation of the population surveyed.

- Use parallel racial and ethnic identity terms.

Biased: Those surveyed who are African American responded similarly to those who reported being White. In comparison, the non-Whites also responded similarly to the Asians surveyed.

There are many forms of nonparallel terms here: (1) The term “African American” is paired with “White,” which is not parallel. (2) The African American population is also labeled as “non-Whites,” using one racial group as the primary group. (3) The term “Asian” is also not parallel.

Better: Those surveyed who are African American responded similarly to those who reported being European American. In comparison, the African-Americans also responded similarly to the Japanese Americans surveyed.

This sentence uses parallel terms for all racial identities, as well as using the specific term “Japanese-American.” For detailed instructions on these terms, look here: <http://supp.apa.org/style/pubman-ch03.00.pdf>.

- Use “people-first” language when discussing labels.

Biased: The autistic child worked with the teacher who taught all of the special children at the school.

This sentence only defines the children by their labels, either “autistic” or “disabled,” instead of acknowledging that they are people first.

Better: The child with autism worked with the teacher who taught all of the children with disabilities at the school.

Here, the child or children are always placed first, with a label named afterwards. This way, the reader always sees the children first, then their

label or disorder. The phrase “special children” is also changed to “children with disabilities,” as the term “special” has become colloquial.